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US Domestic Agency in the Early Cold War Foreign Policy, 1945-1950

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to synthesize the United States policymakers' decisions on the course of the second half of the 1940s. Personal judgements and bureaucratic agency converged to give birth to a latent but emerging confrontation with the former Soviet Union. The international system shifted to become bipolar and the two superpowers' behaviors became more antagonistic. This paper emphasizes the American perspective of the rising confrontation, and the fateful United States' decision-makers' view of the situation during that period.*
Keywords: *Cold War, Decision-making, Foreign Policy, Human Agency, Judgements, United States of America.*
الملخص: يركب هذا المقال مواقف صانعي القرار الأمريكيين في النصف الثاني من الأربعينيات من القرن الماضي. آراء شخصية وتدخلات من عناصر الإدارة الأمريكية تقاربت لتغذي الصراع الكامن والصاعد بين الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والاتحاد السوفيتي. النظام العالمي انتقل إلى ثنائية القطبية وسلوكا القوتين أصبحا متناقضين. هذا المقال يفحص الرؤية الأمريكية التي أدت الى قرارات حاسمة وقتئذ.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الحرب الباردة - صناعة القرار- السياسة الخارجية – الفعل الإنساني - رأي - الولايات المتحدة الامريكانية

1. Introduction

The questions of perception and human agency are critical in foreign policy and decision making. By the end of the Second World War, the structural changes that started to take shape on the international stage obliged the US policy makers to reappraise their priorities and relationship with the new emerging superpower, namely the USSR. The tacit arrangement and war alliance that dominated the relationship between the United States and the former Soviet Union began to fade away. Latent distrust and antagonism grew in the two camps. The seeds of confrontation that had been developing even before the war came to the fore and were to foster tensions which would erupt in different parts of the

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globe during the second half of the twentieth century. It is difficult to determine a major cause for the birth of what Bernard Baruch, former advisor of Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and later Walter Lippman (1947) called "the Cold War."[1] It is also difficult to identify a specific event or decision as its origin. One of the characteristics of the struggle was its fuzzy beginning, in no way sharp or sudden but continuous and increasing. Additionally, and more importantly, it seems that the latent and growing conflict was forged by human agency in both camps.

How could human perceptions and domestic judgements shape US foreign and defense policies in the aftermath of the Second World War? How far were the measures taken by the Truman administration in the course of the second half of the 1940s critical? To which extent did they aggravate the situation? What were the objectives of American policy makers? To establish straight forward dialogue with the USSR to dissipate misunderstandings or to undertake numerous actions to thwart perceived Soviet ambitions? Were their different interpretations and previsions relevant enough to meet their needs? The present paper is an attempt to synthesize some individual judgements and decisions that directed American foreign policy during that period.

2. Background: Ideology on a Global Scale

Apart from individual judgements, the main point of discord between the United States and the Soviet Union was, without doubt, the deep ideological gap between capitalism and liberalism in the one hand and the Marxist-communist vision of the world on another. By the end of the Second World War, the defeat of Germany was imminent, the collapse of some empires and the declines of others left the way open for the birth of a bipolar world in which the main actors would be the two emerging superpowers having opposite ideologies. The stakes would be the reorganization of the world. Each side's fear that the other would expand its influence and creed worldwide made that they took respective measures to hinder that feared expansion.

At the very outset, the basic principles on which the United States was to carry out its policy towards the Communist bloc had ideological motivations combined with national interests drive. Furthermore, that policy was to be conducted through different political, economic, and military measures from 1945 to 1950. The principal aims of that policy were psychological and deterrent. However, paradoxically, those very measures that aimed at diminishing Soviet influence and hamper its development – particularly in the European continent – were to fuel Soviet aggressive policies on the ruins of Europe.

3. Kennan: Domestic Perceptions of a Global Threat

Immediate post-war US foreign policy was mainly goaded by the vision of the Marxist-Leninist ideology attempting to invade Europe. US policymakers viewed Soviet leaders as "necessarily disingenuous and insincere" (Kennan, 1946) and the Soviet system as a "political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the USA there can be no permanent modus-vivendi" (Kennan, 1946). The approach to deal with such a threat was clearly outlined by diplomat and policy maker George F. Kennan in 1946 and 1947. That

[1] The term was first coined by businessman Bernard Baruch on April 16, 1947. It was then recaptured and popularized by Walter Lippmann in his well-known book *Cold War*.

founding concept of the United States' foreign policy towards the USSR was *Containment*. Kennan was in post at Moscow in 1946 and he undertook a meticulous observation and analysis of Soviet political behavior. He advocated a "vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points" to contain the USSR (Kennan, 1987: 862). Kennan's assertion and what would be the chief motor of US foreign policy in the Cold War was that containment "would promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power" (ibid, p.868). On his return from the Soviet Union, Kennan created the strategic Department of State Policy Planning Staff and he was appointed its first director. The convictions and objectives of some American officials towards the USSR were clear in 1946-1947.

Together with Kennan's policy of Containment, the speech made by British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, had great political importance. It described a fragile Europe about to fall in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Churchill stressed the vital role of the United States, and called for a strong Anglo-Saxon alliance and more powers to be granted to the newly born United Nations Organization. Churchill thus interpreted the newly born conflict as a struggle for the survival of the Anglo-Saxon civilization.

The main political implementation of Kennan's principles of *Containment* started to take shape in March 1947. It became obvious to US policymakers that Britain could no longer afford to help the Greek authorities. Internal communist factions threatened the monarchy there. It also seemed that Turkey was on the agenda of Soviet enterprises. Referring to the events in Greece and Turkey, President Truman made it clear that the policy of the United States was "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Truman qtd in Gaddis, 2005:22). The United States chose political and economic aids as the chief strategy to contain Russian expansion in Europe. The ideological rivalry and latent mistrust metamorphosed into political and economic confrontation on the European chessboard.

However, the first significant economic measure was taken directly against the USSR. It occurred in 1945 when this latter backed the Polish communist takeover in Poland. The American reaction was an interruption of the Lend-lease. The measure was considered by Soviet Premier Stalin as an unfounded and unacceptable attempt to pressure the Soviet Union (Herring, 1969: 93-114). The respective postures of the two superpowers hardened. However, the main economic confrontation was conducted through the European Recovery Program initiated by Secretary of State George Marshall in June 1947. The United States' Congress declared that "the existing situation in Europe endangers the establishment of lasting peace, the general welfare and national interest of the United States" ("Economic Cooperation Act," 1948). In addition, while exposing his economic plan for Europe, Marshall's thoughts were explicit:

> Any government which maneuvers to block the recovery of other countries cannot expect help from us. Furthermore, governments, political parties, or groups which seek to perpetuate human misery in order to profit there from politically or otherwise will encounter the opposition of the United States (Marshall qtd in Pierce, 2003:186).

4. Franck, Stimson, and Wallace: Debates within the Truman Administration

On the military side, the Manhattan Project - the secret elaboration of the atomic bomb – and the decision to use it triggered a debate inside the Truman administration. Additionally, extreme precautions were taken by the Whitehouse not to inform the USSR about it since the view of American policy makers was that "the seemingly uncooperative attitude of Russia in military matters stemmed from the necessity of maintaining security" ("The Interim Committee," 1945).

However, in 1945, eminent nuclear physicists working then with the War and Navy Departments made their voice heard against the use of the atomic bomb. Headed by Nobel Prize physicist James Franck, a committee issued a report that warned the Truman administration of the dangers of nuclear weaponry. Additionally, in July, Leó Szilárd and sixty-nine other fellow scientists signed and circulated a secret petition to ask Truman more restraint in dealing with atomic weaponry ("Petition," 1945).

Despite the appeal of the Franck Committee and the Szilárd Petition not to use the bomb and their warning that such a use would spark "an unlimited armament race" (Franck, 1945: 2), no doubts were left in the Soviets' mind that the United States had taken possession of a terrifying weapon and that it could use it at any moment.

The ambiguous and somehow contradictory position of Harry Truman's Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, first as a defender of the decision to use the bomb against Japan, and then as an advocate for direct talks with the USSR to "enter an arrangement with the Russians, the general purposes of which would be the control and limit the use of the atomic bomb" (Stimson qtd in Paterson, 1989: 280) was too late, thus inefficient. The bomb exploded over Hiroshima but the message went to Moscow. The decision to use the bomb sparked an arms race and a security dilemma that exacerbated all along the Cold War. The United States' *Get-tough* foreign policy that had started however did have a prominent detractor.

In 1946, former Vice-President and progressive Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace openly criticized President Truman's hardline *Get-tough* policy and believed that it was doomed to failure. Anticipating Soviet reactions to such a policy, Wallace (1946) warned that it might lead to more tensions: "...to the Russians all of the defence and security measures of Western powers seem to have an aggressive intent." Urging a conciliatory approach to American policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Wallace argued very early that any military build-up on the American side would lead to an armament race and eventually to war in which the USA would be seen as the belligerent initiator (Wallace, 2007: 42). Henry A. Wallace resigned in 1946.

Later, with the different events that occurred in 1948 and 1949, the origins of the Cold War became misty but tensions were palpable and worsened. These years witnessed a chain of measures and counter measures that deteriorated international relations. The Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, the Berlin Blockade, and mainly the explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, were events that led the Truman administration to seek for a reappraisal of its foreign and defence policies. The launch of the *Mutual Defense Assistance Programme* for the United States' allies, and the formation of the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* split Europe into two military camps. That was to accentuate the Cold War.

5. Enter Nitze, the CDP, and *NSC-68*: the militarization of containment

One of the most significant domestic factors that determined the future course of the conflict was without doubt the *National Security Council memo n°68* (*NSC-68*). Strategist and policymaker Paul Nitze - then head of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department - and his team drafted the document. They submitted it to President Truman in March 1950. *NSC 68* stipulated that the policy of containment (as conceived and advocated by George Kennan) was not efficient unless it was coupled with a strong military build-up. To Nitze and his team,

> Without superior aggregate military strength, in being and readily mobilizable, a policy of 'containment' – which is in effect a policy of calculated and gradual coercion – is no more than a policy of bluff (*NSC-68*, 1950).

A debate took place inside the Truman administration over the relevance of the document. Kennan viewed that Nitze was guilty of a severe distortion and misapplication of the policy he had outlined, and the diplomat denounced Nitze for "militarizing" containment (Burr and Wampler, 2004). In spite of Kennan's views that the build-up of a United States' large nuclear arsenal would be unwise (Weinstein and Rubel, 2002: 583), *NSC-68* gained the approbation of President Truman. Indeed, a concentration of domestic forces pushed for the approval of *NSC-68* and the militarization of Containment.

The most powerful actor in favor of *NSC-68* was the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD). That interest group gathered influential people from military, the defense establishment, and the foreign policy elite in the United States. The CPD was originally founded by fervent Cold Warriors who pushed hard towards an uncompromising confrontation with the Soviet Union. Among its founding members were Tracy S. Voorhees, James B. Conant, and Vannevar Bush (Sanders, 1983:54). Paul Nitze helped the creation of the Committee (Gravel and Lauria, 2008:125).

Tracy S. Voorhees held various functions within the Department of Defense among which the post of Under Secretary of the United States Army from August 1949 to April 1950. He was Chair of the CPD from 1951 to 1953. James B. Conant was a prominent scientist working inside the defense establishment. In 1941, he became the Chair of the National Defense Research Committee (NDRC). During the Second World War, he supervised key military research projects such as the Manhattan Project which developed the first atomic bomb. In 1945, he was an influential member of the Interim Committee which advocated the use the atomic bomb against Japan. After the Second World War, he was member of the powerful General Advisory Committee of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).

The initial aim of CPD-I was to overcome the opposition to *NSC-68* inside the Truman Administration and among Congressmen. Its objective was also to "awake" a people it judged "asleep" about the "gravity of the situation" (Conant qtd in Hershberg, 1993:491). Due to the lobbying of the CPD, together with the start of the war in the Korean peninsula, President Truman adopted the recommendations of the fateful document (Gravel and Lauria, 2008: 125). In the late 1950 and throughout year 1951, the CPD strove – with success – to alert the public opinion and put pressure on policymakers to implement

the essence of *NSC-68* i.e. huge defense spending and the elaboration of the Hydrogen Bomb. To achieve that task the CPD worked both inside and outside the political establishment, lobbying Congress, and airing weekly television shows on NBC and a radio shows on the MBS (Mutual Broadcasting System). That year the defense budget took 67 percent of the federal budget, rising from 13 billion dollars to 60 billion dollars (ibid., p. 125). Via its various campaigns from 1951 to 1953, the CPD and Nitze worked hard to alert and prepare the American people on what they considered the "year of maximum danger" for the United States: 1954 (Nitze qtd in Crockatt, 2002: 262). Cold War Historian James G. Hershberg argues that the CPD generated an "ideological appeal to the American People to win a Cold War of indefinite duration or else to triumph in a hot war" (Hershberg, 1993: 493-94). CPD-I dissolved in 1953.

The adoption of *NSC-68* had critical consequences on the course of US grand strategy in the 1950s and 1960s. The most important result was a readjustment of American foreign and defense policies with a significant increase of armament expenditures. *NSC-68* is believed to have paved the way for the realization of the Hydrogen Bomb, more involvement in the Korean Peninsula (The Korean War), and so, the pursuit and intensification of the Cold War in the following decades (Hammond, 1962).

6. Conclusion

It is now admitted that human agency and individual subjective judgements were as important as interstate interests in Cold War rivalry. Policymakers, advisors, and interest groups and their respective outlooks inside the US domestic arena played a fateful role in the escalation of tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union.

Nowadays, the same elements of human agencies often converge to shape American political behavior on the world stage and attitudes towards new preconceived "threats." Contemporary different episodes regarding US relations with states such as North Korea, Iran, or Russia are striking illustrations of the importance of human agency regardless of national grand strategy. Indeed, the diverging attitudes of George W. Bush's, Barak Obama's, and Donald J. Trump's administrations regarding present-day challenges to the United States show that personal judgements are fateful in foreign and defense policymaking.

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